THE DA LAT MELODY

TALES
LEGENDS
AND STORIES
FROM VIETNAM
AST AND PRESENT

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THE
DA LAT MELODY

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THE DALAT MELODY

PHAM DINH TRONG

His first night in Da Lat, Nguyen Thanh had the best sleep he had ever had. It came naturally and he surrendered himself to its light touch, as light as the balmy air in this mountain resort Refreshed in the morning the composer took a stroll on the deserted road in front of the house in which he had spent the night, shivering with pleasure in the chilly air. His eyes wandered over the yellow mimosas and over the villas still asleep under slightly swaying firs and far apart from one another, surprised to discover the quaintness of each one.

Each light step he took on the dew-drenched road gave him a new feeling, but Nguyen Thanh knew Da Lat was revealing itself to him as it would to a painter. What would it be to a composer? And, listening to the humming firs and the sweet song of a lone bird he tried to detect a characteristic melody,

but the object of his quest remained elusive behind floating shreds of mist.

Then he saw a little girl emerge from the gate of the house immediately before him. Her appearance struck him as the most pleasant discovery he had made this morning and he looked at her with open interest. Clad in a pair of bright red trousers, woollen jumper and woollen cap the child looked very much like a toy rabbit. Nguyen Thanh felt an impulsive desire to cuddle her in his arms, and when she lifted up her chubby face with round black eyes the composer reached out his hands to her. But the child stopped a few steps from him, pressed her hands together and chimed, "Good morning, Uncle!".

"Good morning, my little girl," Nguyen Thanh replied.

"Where are you going so early?"

"I'm going to the baker's."

"Where?"

"Just over there." The girl pointed to a shop at the intersection, and Nguyen Thanh matched his steps to hers. Chatting with her he found out that her name was Thuong Thuong and that she was four years old. In the shop Thuong Thuong only asked for a wafer, but Nguyen Thanh pressed on her a doughnut.

Hand in hand the two walkedback. "Here's my house," Thuong Thuong said and trotted in through the gate. Nguyen Thanh followed her with his eyes.

The following morning Nguyen Thanh went out and waited for Thuong Thuong, but the latter did not show up. He waited for her again on the third morning and was about to give up, remembering that it was Sunday, when a man emerged from the house with Thuong Thuong in his arms.

"Here he is," Thuong Thuong told the man excitedly, "the young uncle who bought me the cake."

"Don't call him young uncle. He should be my senior, you know", the man corrected her and turned to greet Nguyen Thanh and invited him in.

Through Thuong Thuong the composer came to know her parents, particularly her father, a secondary-school teacher named Bach. In return Bach found in Nguyen Thanh a confidant to whom he could tell his so far well-kept secrets.

One evening, he came over to Bach's place for a tour of the town at night, as the latter had promised. It had started raining early in the evening—a chilly, fine drizzle one often finds in the North, which usually discourages any attempts to venture out into

the cold. When he reached his destination, it began to rain in earnest and they had to postpone the tour. They relaxed in Bach's cosy room sipping hot coffee and talking of nothing in particular. Later on, Thuong Thuong yawned sleepily and her mother, knowing that the men wanted to be alone together, excused herself and left with the child.

"Do you know that I didn't intend to stay on here at first?" Bach confided.

"But love was stronger, huh?", Thanh smiled.

"Yeah. My wife is a native here. But that's only a small part of it", Bach went on. "The real reason is far more complicated!"

This promises to be an interesting story, Thanh thought. But he didn't say anything and waited. At last Bach began to tell his story.

I greeted the news of my assignment to a post in this forsaken Lam Dong Plateau with some misgiving. Graduated with honours from the Teachers' Training College, I had expected something better than that. The second surprise came when upon my arrival I was told that Mr. Nam, a leading cadre of the province, wanted to see me. Why a leading cadre? I asked myself. Surely not to tell me where to find my school. For someone in the Personnel division or

better still, the Head of the Provincial Educational Board, can do that. Then, why him ? Something must be in the air !

Mr Nam had the same austere look as became an elderly leading cadre. He was apparently a chain-smoker for he often broke off and rolled a cigarette. At first, he talked about the weather and enquired after my health – the usual stuff, you know, before embarking on something more substantial. Then he talked about some wild and remote region in the province from which he had just returned. "There isn't another place where the soil is so fertile and so amazingly untamed," he exclaimed. "It'll be a big granary that can feed millions ! But all you can see there right now are some scattered hamlets of Chau Ma and Stieng ethnic minorities and two or three thousand pioneers coming from the plains in the Northern and Central parts of the country to tame the wilderness." He spoke at length of all the hardships and privations these pioneers had to undergo but I hardly paid any heed to what he was saying and did not therefore notice the worried and preoccupied look on his face as he talked. I held my breath when he complained that there were hundreds of children there but there was not yet a single school for them, and apprehensively waited. As expected, he presently

told me in a tone that was half pleading, half ordering, "We think you should go there."

"But are there enough pupils to form a secondary school there?" I asked.

He looked at me searchingly and said, "The first thing to do is to organize a class for first-form pupils. When we have enough staff, we'll think of opening other classes".

But I'm not supposed to teach first-form tots! I was on the point of protesting. Mr Nam interrupted me and said conversationally, "We know it would be a waste to let a secondary teacher teach the first form, particularly when there's still an acute shortage of staff for secondary schools. But we can't help it, you know. Primary teachers are so scarce and the people there can't wait forever. An old man told me the other day that his family came here in search of a better life but he was not going to sacrifice his grandchildren's schooling for this and would leave if we didn't do something about it. And there are the children of these highlanders to consider too. Is it right that they should remain illiterate now that the revolution has prevailed?" He paused to let the point sink in. "You will go there, huh?", he urged. "We'll do our best to recruit more teachers and will send them to your place right away. That's a promise".

I don't know why I accepted the offer. Reluctantly, of course. Maybe because of his worried look. Maybe because I thought that I couldn't refuse it anyway. But I accepted it and reproached myself a moment later for being so silly as not to refuse it. I had plenty of reasons to do so. Now I just couldn't go back on my word.

I drove to the district seat and from there set out on foot for my destination, which was two days' trudge across a valley covered with head-high elephant grass and an arduous climb over a steep mountain. I cursed myself for not taking a rucksack with me instead of the shiny and big suitcase which I was now dragging along as a deadweight. From time to time on my way I met a group of dark-complexioned highlanders. The men wore loin-cloths and the women were bare from the waist up. I looked at them with curiosity but they completely ignored me, which made me feel all the more forlorn.

The attitude of the next man I ran into was altogether different. He was a pioneer, who was on his way to the township to attend to some business. He greeted me jovially and, when he knew that I was heading for his place, decided to cancel the trip, took charge of my heavy suitcase and offered to lead the way.

The man was open-hearted and through chatting to him I got to know that his name was Kha. that he was a war veteran who had served in the army for more than ten years and was wounded in the war against the US imperialists and that his eldest son was now himself a soldier. Since they had settled down here four other children of his could not continue their studies because there was not yet any school. Only his youngest child could attend the first form and that, at a price. For the child had to walk for two hours every day across a wild valley and numerous paddy fields, under a mercilessly hot sun to reach his school, which was run by an army contingent and was intended primarily for the soldiers' children.

Mr Kha's house was crowded with people who came to greet me some minutes after my arrival. With apparent eagerness they discussed the prospect of their future school. Some even proposed that Mr Kha's spacious place should be used temporarily as a classroom for the first form, which might well be started the following day. I dismissed the idea as too simplistic and hasty. I spent the next few days working out a plan for the organization of the class, seeing the authorities there and asking for their financial help for the purchase of teaching aids. The communal head was an ethnic Chau Ma by the name of M'Da. He had five children, all of school age and none could

read or write. He was all for an early opening of the school but he was not overzealous about it as were the pioneers. He approved of my plan and did everything in his power to help realize it but he didn't tell me to hurry. That's why I was able to do it my way at an almost leisurely pace. Day followed day and still there was no class. It was not until a fortnight later, with the appearance of Tam, a young teacher whose urbane manner belied her Dalat origin, that things began to change at a dizzy tempo and in quite another direction too".

Bach paused and stood up, smiling, "But it's a long story and let's have a drink first".

"Oh, forget it", I said, knowing that Bach was no drinker.

"I insist", Bach said "To make me more articulate. I'm feeling a bit confused".

"By whom ? Oh, the girl, right ?", Nguyen Thanh said jokingly.

Bach smiled shamefacedly but brushed it off, "I don't drink, but a sip of the good stuff won't do any harm."

He fetched a bottle of white wine and poured it in two glasses, one to the brim and the other only half full. He handed Nguyen Thanh the full one and

kept the other for himself. But he did not touch it and resumed his talk.

"Tam's transfer was also masterminded by that same strong-willed Mr Nam and thinking that I would find an ally in her, I gave vent to the anger that was building up inside me.

"I was trained to teach the 12th form and not the first form", I exploded with anger and said in a sharp and bitter tone alien even to myself, "My subject is world literature and I have nothing to do with a primer! The Educational Board would never have tricked me into this if they had had their say. This must be Mr Nam's famous idea. Only an uncultured man like him is capable of treating us intellectuals with such disrespect!"

"The startled expression on her face warned me that something was utterly wrong. And instead of chiming in, she made a gesture with her hand as if she wanted to interrupt me, to say something in protest. So I stopped and glanced at her inquiringly. It was then that I noticed her very beautiful eyes. Tam had a lovely face and a fine figure, but her most outstanding feature was definitely her eyes. They were big and black and bright and seemed lost in reverie. Only a heartless man could send such a pretty creature to this remote place. And I suddenly

felt that my misforture, great as it was, was nothing compared with hers. How could she hope to preserve that smooth and pink and fair complexion of hers without the protection of her umbrella? It may sound a bit silly but I just can't think of a Dalat girl without her umbrella. The first time I ever found myself at Dalat I marvelled at the graceful way those girls handled their colourful umbrellas. A beautiful sight it was—the girls, their umbrellas and the hazy Dalat mist! But now Tam was here, far from Dalat where she belonged, unthinkable. She should know what was awaiting her here. Not merely teaching, my dear colleague, I thought. We'll have to go into the forest to fell trees for construction. We'll have to prepare the ground for the school premises. And we'll have to do some kind of farming for our own subsistence, for we can't expect too much from our food coupons.

Her silence got on my nerves. "Well, any comments, Tam?", I asked apprehensively.

"True, Mr Nam wants me here. But you're wrong when you said that he forced me into this "exile" For your information, I came here of my own free will. I volunteered to do so!"

Well, think of that! I looked at the young girl with pity. You're too young and you've crammed your silly

head with that new fangled and nonsensical idea of heroism. You'll regret it one day, my dear. Of course, I didn't tell her that for fear of offending her.

Tam suggested that while we were waiting for the school to be built, we could, from the following day, start a class for first-form pupils at somebody's house, provided that it was spacious enough for the purpose. I rejected the idea on the grounds that children were not like grown-ups -- they needed a classroom but they also needed a play-ground, that there should be desks in proportion to their frail and small bodies that if we wished their hand-writing to be good at all, there should be adequate slates and not these makeshift rough boards, and so on and so forth. In short, irrefutable pedagogic points. What's more, of the two of us, I was obviously the boss and my word carried weight. So all Tam could do was to ask in resignation, "Then how long will the children have to wait?"

"We shall see", I replied. "What's all the rush?"

The fact was, I did not know when we would be able to start teaching them. But the next day, an event of tremendous importance took place, which aroused me from inertia.

Mr Kha' youngest son and some of his friends were hurrying along a muddy trail in the valley on

their way to school when they were attacked by a pack of wild piglets whose mother had been killed some days before by a hunter. Driven by hunger, these beasts became exceedingly aggressive and rushed at any moving thing on sight. The children ran for their lives in all directions and Mr Kha's son got lost in the woods. A joint rescue team of pioneers and highlanders was formed. Tam also went with them. They searched the grass-covered valley, probed along the stream swollen with rain, peered at numerous lakes and ponds and then went deep into the woods and it was not until dusk that they found the boy who was exhausted and almost out of his wits with fear. When everybody had come home and there was still no sign of Tam, I felt a bit uneasy. There was a kind of emptiness without her presence which disturbed me. I waited restlessly for her return till late in the evening and when she did not show up, I decided that she must have lost her way in the jungle. K'Da and I lit a torch and headed straight back to the woods.

It was a real trial trying to keep pace with K'Da in the darkened jungle. I had to half walk half run after him. I forgot how many times I had stumbled and fallen over. I did not even feel any pain when I ran into thorny bushes and got myself badly scratched I was so worried about Tam's safety, you

know. I held myself responsible for this tragedy since I had lent a deaf ear to her plea that we should open a class for the children as soon as possible. I knew that she loved them while I was busy pitying myself!

This long run in the dark was going to kill me. I felt so weary and breathless I thought I would drop dead any time. But still I stumbled on and on and on. Suddenly somebody called out, "Uncle K' Da!" The echoing voice suggested that it came from some confined place and while I was still trying to locate it, K' Da made a sudden turn to the right and walked confidently to what seemed to be a small cave. And there, in the flickering light of our torch, I saw Tam, curled up in a damp hollow. She fitfully cried out again, "Uncle K' Da!", and sobbed like a child. I stood there, petrified. K' Da also looked moved. A moment later, he asked soothingly, "Can you walk by yourself?"

Tam smiled through her tears, "Would you please first build a fire? I'm so cold I can hardly move."

K' Da silently made for the cave entrance and vanished into the night. Presently he came back, bringing an armload of dry twigs. The warm light from the bonfire chased out the damp and musty air and the cave looked warm and cosy. Tam sat

close to the fire for warmth and I was really glad to see the pallor of her face gradually turn into a healthy pink again. I wished I had had something interesting to tell her. Maybe I could have if there had been only the two of us in the cave.

"At first I was so afraid that a tiger or a boa might find me in here," she told K' Da, "that I didn't feel cold. Only when I saw the torch, and then was sure that it was you, did I start shivering like mad."

K' Da looked at the fire and said, "I'll be ashamed to face your Dad, Tam. What will he say when he knows this? And he loves you so."

"What makes you think so, uncle?", the girl beamed.

"You're his only child, no? He missed you terribly when we were still living in the jungle. He was talking about you all the time and my heart ached for him."

"Let's pass the night here", Tam suggested "Dawn's coming anyway. I don't like to walk in the dark. Not any more."

This would suit me fine. For I wanted to stay with her through the night. The cave was warm enough and looking at the moving shadows on

its wall, I thought of the ancient cave men and felt rather primitive. K' Da did not say anything and I knew that he had consented to her proposal.

"As I was going deep into the jungle" Tam went on, "I saw on my way some underground shelters covered by rotten bamboo trunks and furnished with rough bamboo beds and tables. And I somehow thought that they must have been the place my father lived in during the days he fought against the Americans. And my eyes filled with tears when I found a meagre left-over of dried-up cassava skin scattered beside a heap of cold ashes."

Tam's voice trembled and she broke off. K' Da remained motionless as if in deep recollection. Tam resumed her talk in an undertone.

"Uncle K' Da, was that the place to which every evening my father and his friends returned, exhausted and shivering with malaria, and sat down to their frugal meal? Was that the very place where my father had gone without food for several days before he was offered two boiled jackfruit stones? He told me he had eaten only one stone and put the other aside for later use, but the voracious rats had robbed him of it. When I got to this cave and found at the entrance a tattered piece of cloth from an army uniform and some sodden butts of rolled

cigarettes. I again thought that they were my father's cigarettes.

"He's a chain-smoker!" K' Da broke in.

"Lost in thought, I must have remained here a bit too long because when I retraced my steps it was already dark. I tried to find my way back but couldn't. I wandered about a long time and the last thing I knew, I again found myself right back here. It was as good a shelter as any and I stayed on waiting for dawn to come. But please tell me, uncle K' Da, is this one of the places my father lived in during his fighting days?"

I was spell-bound by Tam's story. Well, what a wonderful father she has! And Tam had more than proved that she was his worthy daughter. I believed too that her father had been here and waited longingly for K' Da's confirmation.

"You are right", K' Da said. "Your father and the region's first armed unit had operated here since the uprising. He was the unit's commander then and I was his messenger and guide. Those were difficult days. Tam and the people had to live wholly on cassava, which was also in short supply. But the people still gave it to us. Hungry, but they all wanted to join the revolution. You should have seen those

courageous women who were carrying both their children and ammunition on their backs!"

"And where is that shelter that caved in in a flash flood with my father and several of his friends in it? He told me that when you came and dug them out, he was almost dead and that had it not been for your help, he would have been killed long ago."

"Oh it's a long way from here", K' Da replied. "When your father came here the other day, he asked me to take him there. The place had changed so much that we hardly recognized it: There's a new settlement for nomads and there's even a village for people coming from the lowlands to open up virgin lands. You can see ricefields there now."

"Is there any school up there, uncle?" Tam asked eagerly.

"Not yet," K' Da said. "Your father also questioned me about that during his visit. Well, I'll be damned. But where can I find teachers for it?"

All of a sudden I thought of Mr Nam who had coaxed me into this hole and felt uneasy that there might be a link between him and Tam's father

"It's a pity that he has only me If he had another son or daughter, he'd certainly send him or her there

right away even if the poor thing isn't a student at a Teachers' training college like me."

"It sounds like brother Nam allright! He always thinks of us, see?" K' Da exclaimed.

I was taken aback at his shout. Well, that's it! The man who had seen me my first day at Dalat and ordered me up here was Tam's father. He even sent his only child to this forlorn place. I recalled my morbid criticism of the man and looked pleadingly at his daughter, but Tam was gazing dreamily at the fire.

"I was in my second year at college when he asked me to take up teaching here," Tam confided. "Oh, my! You should have seen his embarrassment when he did that, for he suddenly became very talkative. He talked about this land, about the people's love for the revolutionary cause and about you, uncle K' Da."

I was fortunate enough to hear this story of Tam's father, of a soldier's life in the war. I tried to find some family traits in the girl and was sure that she was just like her father. And she looked so beautiful and sonoble I almost got worried. How could I be worthy of her love?

The story of Tam's father was like a wisp of fresh air that cleared my doltish brain and purified my

selfish and callous heart and changed my way of life forever. And it also brought me love. Two classes were opened the next day. Tam taught the first form at K' Da's place and I taught the second form at Mr Kha's. That was in the morning. In the afterncon, we helped the workers in the building of the school under the supervision of Mr. Kha. The work brought us closer, Tam and I, and we fell in love with each other. I love Tam, I love what she and her father love and that's true love.

Later on, when there were enough teachers for a secondary school there, I was transferred to the province's Middle-level normal school while Tam went back to her college to finish her studies. Our Thuong Thuong was then two years old.

Bach concluded the story and took a sip at his glass. Thanh remained silent as if in deep meditation. Bach was silent too. They were only aroused from their thoughts by Thuong Thuong's muffled cough from the back room. Bach glanced at his watch and said, "Only nine and it seems so late already."

Deeply impressed by the story which struck a promising note, Nguyen Thanh took hasty leave of Bach. Back in his room, the composer started furiously jotting down the symphony that had just come into his head. He wrote all night, excited and

happy, and finished what he called "The Dalat Melody". Under the title he added "Dedicated to little Thuong Thuong" After that, he dozed off for a minute or two and got up at the usual time. He took a shower, combed his hair carefully and put on his best suit as if he was going to an important performance. Then he strolled lazily to the gate and stood there to wait for Thuong Thuong.

THE GIRL'S SPONSOR

PHAM THI MINH THU

So, the Department's administration clerk was in a pensive mood after she had by chance overheard what these girl-students were saying about love and marriage. Her small, dry fingers ran absent-mindedly over the keyboard of her old typewriter. She frowned deeply, trying to find an insinuation of some kind in their gossip until, bitter and powerless, she shrugged and murmured: "But who cares what they're saying".

So indeed couldn't care less. At least, she was immune to her aunt's nagging that an unmarried woman was just like a rocking boat without a rudder! And she kept harping on the same theme every time she made what seemed to her a long and risky journey by train from her small town in the highlands to Hanoi, to commemorate the deaths of So's parents. She was an old and obstinate woman who had made a point of bringing home this message

to her thirty-year-old niece Her aunt . This small, withered spinster! Not that So was not aware of her aunt's love and affection for her, but still the matter-of-fact tone of her advice always irritated her. To be single at her age was no doubt a bit unnatural. But was it her fault?

«It's high time you looked after yourself, darling" her aunt entreated. Y"ou should know that a woman can only bear her child at a certain age!" Worse, she told So this right in front of all her brothers and sister, which made her blush profusely. First, the annoying counsel "Don't forget you're young only once": now this and what next? As if she had nothing else to worry about. What about her youngest sister who had just finished the 8th form and already wanted to look around for a job? What about the wedding of her brother, the one next to her in age; who had graduated from the Polytechnic several years before? How was she to arrange the studies of yet another brother who had just been demobbed? And why didn't her aunt congratulate her on her recent promotion, or ask her about all these citations she had got? Why should all this never produce any reaction from her kind but boring aunt?

Outside, spring had come. She looked at the blue sky through the transparent windowpanes—a tender

blue which reminded her of a headscarf of the same colour of an innocent girl of seventeen years ago... Gee, Springtime and seventeen! The girl inherited her mother's charming smile and fair complexion and her father's bright eyes and healthy slimness. True, the smallpox contracted during her days as a war refugee still left some unwelcome marks on her rosy cheeks, but at her age, she was still a girl to dream about. At the time they started building the school's foundations was she not – a part–time worker–the centre of attraction of a lot of boy students and young teachers? They scrambled for her acquaintance. They sent her ardent love letters. They made all kinds of advances–subtle as well as rude–to win her heart but, alas, to no avail. For her heart belonged to the boy living on the same street, who had given her this blue scarf. This land surveyer of hers left, with his team, for a destination he did not disclose to her immediately after the evening he had spoken to So of his love for her. But through his letters she knew they were heading south...

In the meantime, she struggled to bring up her kid brothers and sister and tried her best to give them a decent schooling as her parents had wished for in their lifetime and she waited and waited for her boy to come back and refused all advances from her

admirers. She attended a typing course when construction work was done and later was given a clerical job at this department. Spring came and went. Season succeeded season... And her complexion gradually lost its freshness. Still she persisted in waiting for his return. Then one day, she learned the news of his death, which left her stricken with sorrow and grief. She folded the blue scarf and put it at the bottom of her suit-case, together with his letters, which she had once thought to symbolize the key to a blissful world still unknown to her at the age of thirty-three.

... Well, they looked almost the same – her blue scarf and this blue patch of sky! Now that she was considered by her kind aunt to be past her prime, was she really on the shelf? Taken aback by this sudden kind of reasoning, she sheepishly looked around but there was not a soul in this respectable and immaculately clean office apart from herself and the pendulum clock, which was just then gingerly striking nine. Trying to focus her attention, she attacked the old keyboard vigorously with her bony fingers:

Socialist Republic of Vietnam
Independence – Freedom – Happiness
This is to recommend that :

...

Well. Who would think that there are so many people wanting to learn English! she thought.

This is to recommend that:

. . .

She typed on steadily. Somebody poked his head in and then hurried away. Looking for his mate, maybe.

There was laughter and commotion in the house as she reached the gate. And out of the din, she heard the funny croaking of her third younger brother whose voice was beginning to break, "What are *ni* (1) doing? *Wo* (2) tell *ni* this is mine. Stop taking it!"

So laughed at his imitation. Children were really quick at picking up the language used in plays broadcast over the radio ridiculing the Chinese expansionists. At first, she was amused to hear children mimicking their voice but subsequently this kind of broken Chinese got on her nerves and she decreed that whoever was fond of it could go to the street corner to talk to his heart's content to the old Chinese

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1. 2. *Ni*: Chinese, meaning "You"; *Wo*: Chinese, meaning "I"

selling hot ground nuts there. They feigned obedience then and that couldn't deceive her, for they were notorious for being in fear of nothing!

This must be the case. When the cat's away, the mice will play, she thought. But what's the source of all this merriment?

« You should all know that... ", boomed a voice. So, her first younger brother had come back from the South ! Now, let's see what you're going to tell the children, she smiled. She knocked at the door, four times and in an unhurried way – her way.

" Now, open the door, my good goat.... " The door flew open, and she saw her third younger brother sitting comfortably on the table with his hands clutching at a gaudy tie at his neck. It was he who was chanting the fable in a sing song voice.

She turned to look at the pile of gifts on the bed – clothes, shoes, sandals, shampoo bottles, cakes, sweets. and what not. A big spender no doubt, my young engineer ! she mused.

" Late today, aren't you, dear ? I told them to wait for you before unpacking but they wouldn't listen. Here is the shampoo you asked for. Genuine, not adulterated, of course. I have a surprise for you and I think you would love it... ", her engineer brother

stopped and glanced around. "Hey, kid", he said, "It's So's!"

Her youngest sister, who until then had not said a word, was standing in front of a mirror holding a yellow cardigan against her bust. At the threshold of maidenhood, she was getting plumper and was a real sight for sore eyes.

"Just trying it on," she protested feebly and handed it to her sister.

"Beautiful," So exclaimed, "But the mode befits someone younger. And this colour..."

"Well, who should be afraid of looking younger?", her second younger brother teased. Then he scowled at his brother, "Now won't you let me try that tie on, rascal?".

"Wonderful colour!" her sister cried admiringly.

"Why don't you just try it on, Sirs?" coaxed her engineer brother! "I asked a friend in my team to choose it for you. She's about your age."

"That's right," her third brother echoed. "Just try it on!"

They urged her on and she gave in at last. When she stooped to do up the last button, someone switched on the light.

The cardigan was indeed beautiful. And it fitted her perfectly. Even the brushed knitted flowers looked right. For a moment, she forgot all those worries about crow's feet and dry skin when she first saw the cardigan. The magical light seemed to put a thin layer of powder on her face and the yellowish reflection from the cardigan seemed to brighten it. In the mirror, she found a radiant young So of yore... Suddenly, she was aware of an unusual silence and turning her head, perceived a semi-circle of spell-bound brothers and sister. She took off the cardigan and said in a peremptory tone to hide her shame:

"Enough for the gifts! Set the table for dinner now. And who has put the light on? Doesn't he know that the electricity bill for this month is a little bit too high?"

At the table, they talked about what had happened during the day and before she knew it, they touched upon these recommendation notes.

"A lot of them are learning English these days. I've spent most of my time typing the recommendations". She looked at her dry fingers as if they were the reminder of all this paper work.

"It's a good idea if you learn English too," her second brother ventured a suggestion

"Who? Me? Are you joking? And what for, anyway?" she brushed it aside.

"But it's good to know foreign languages And there's no harm in trying. It'll bring joy to your heart. Just like when you joined the evening class in the past," her engineer brother butted in. "I don't think this will be beyond you, anyway." His eyes twinkled as he said this

Now the talk was switched on to the recent visit of her engineer brother to a certain DKZ enterprise in Ho Chi Minh City. He described the busy Ben Thanh Market, the imposing Independence Palace... "But what left the deepest impression on me," he said, "was the way the Saigonese lassies answered your questions with a sweet "Yes." Her second brother, the family's scholar, briefed them about the conflict between Iran and Iraq. And then it was the turn of her third brother, who complained that he was always teased by the fair sex whenever he went shopping. The conversation, which often changed from one topic to another — each never lasting more than three minutes — had become a kind of ritual they all loved. At last, they wandered back to the question of English learning. Her engineer brother related his friends' experience in the subject. Innocent talk, it appeared. For he even tried to avoid

linking her name to it. "The marvel of it all is that they have enough time to court each other in class and many have become husband and wife." he said "Indeed, quite interesting. Even romantic, I should say."

Dinner was over and the subject was left unsettled. But So knew what he was driving at. "You should have known better, young man," she thought as she did the washing-up. "Wanted to take sides with Auntie, eh?" Meanwhile, the young man was dressing up to go out.

She looked at the light-reflected sky in the mist. Yes, she reasoned, who would like to stay at home on a spring night like this? She followed with her eyes the retreating figure of her brother and sighed. Well, why should she blame him? Wasn't she the one who had felt so sad every time she saw her friends drifting away and the last she heard from them was a note announcing their engagements? He was clever, her brother. No harm in trying indeed. And she had nothing to lose either. She was in fact getting sick of staying home at night.

She kept scrubbing the pan, which was now spotlessly clean. In her mind, she started earnestly considering this propitious English class

For others, a chance meeting might result in a romance which would end in a love match But for her, a worn-out thirty-three-year-old spinster who had died emotionnally long ago with her lover's death, it was simple. All she could pray for was that she would meet a man who was nearly as good as he and who would care for her brothers and sister as he would love her and that would be more than enough. And her poor aunt, of course, would be happy.

The summer vacation was drawing to an end. Most of the teachers had not come back yet. And those who had work to do—supervising the second exam of those who had failed in the first, or seeing their last-year students who were writing their theses—only showed their faces at the office for a moment and then vanished. It was 9 a.m. and there were in this respectable and clean office only Sơ, the pendulum clock and Tuan – a sophomore who had an engagement with his tutor about his coming exam. But the "Clothes Hanger", a nickname given to this illustrious material testing teacher, was late today. Sơ knew the student fairly well and should say, in all fairness, that he was not at all dumb. Maybe he had to sit for the exam the second time because his teacher was too exacting. Surprisingly, the teacher was loved by all his students in spite of his numerous nicknames.

So wondered why he did not come and take his student away with him. She wanted to be alone now. Her mind had been in a turmoil since last night. Damn that amateurish fortune-teller! She seemed to see through her, too! Superstition. Credulity. Well, it served her right! She blamed herself for being so shameless when she had asked the girl who could be her youngest sister about her amourous future. At her age. Incredible!

But the curiosity had been too strong to resist, and she had been impressed by the dexterity with which the girl shuffled the cards. It would really be wonderful if one could "peep" into one's future! She was also urged by the girl's suave voice:

"Just draw a card, darling. That's right. The eight of diamonds, eh? Let it be your "star" card then."

The girl, who happened to be So's neighbour, shuffled the cards and divided them into piles and told her to pick up one card out of these piles. The game went on in the same manner till there were only a few cards left in her hands – the eight of diamonds, the ace of spades, the jack of spades, the seven of clubs, the seven of diamonds, the king of hearts, the ten of hearts and the queen of hearts.

"I can't say you're lucky in our love affairs," said the heartless girl jokingly ". This ace of spades, well... ".

she shook her head in disappointment. "You'll meet with a man who's no good. There will be something really nasty in your relationship"

She paused to let the prediction sink in, then ran her eyes over the jack of spades, the seven of clubs, the seven of diamonds and stopped at the king of hearts. "You have a good friend," she went on. "But the man can't be of any help to you".

The bad man and the good man. But who are they? she pondered. Of all her acquaintances, she couldn't single out anyone who would fit into this miserable jack of spades. Moreover, she was sure that there existed no "emotional" relationship between her and any man, so there couldn't be this "nasty something"! And the good man? It might well be the monitor of her class. He was kind, all right. He always accompanied her home when it rained or was stormy or when there was a power failure and the street-lights went out. But this exemplary man was a married man...

"But don't you worry, darling", the amateurish fortune-teller squinted merrily at the queen of hearts." There will be a kind-hearted woman who is quite willing to act as your sponsor. Everything will be all right again."

Although So dismissed all these predictions as sheer superstition, she still felt sick at heart and was too weary to do anything.

She looked at the English text-book which had been opened but not read all this morning.

"So you are back again", the example in English read. How ironical, she thought. She had waited for her man to come back all her younger days. And if there had not been that condolence note, she would have gone on waiting for him with happiness in her heart for she believed then that happiness did exist and that the future would be hers. She never regretted that she had loved him and had waited for him. But she couldn't hold back her tears and thought of her empty life on nights when she lay awake listening to the storm howling outside or when she was aroused from sleep by the cry of her neighbours' baby or their muffled sleepy talk...

Six months had gone by since the day they talked about the possibility of her joining the English class, which had rekindled in her crippled heart some vague hope for a brighter future. And what had been presumed to be a pastime proved to be a headache. For English, with its endless peculiarities, had taken up all her time and sometimes she wished she had never attended the course.

Still she went to the class, rain or shine. She was just like that – never left anything unfinished. What's more, everyone at the Department knew that she was learning English and she would be a laughing stock if she dropped out now. Her achievements in studies, which were second to none, were due partly to her secret desire to prove herself and partly to her love of the busy tempo of it all. Needless to say how happy she would feel when she could one day type with ease a scientific paper for the Head of the Department, who was no doubt as pleased as Punch with her new talent.

She worked by day and studied every evening. Her wooden sandals clattered day in day out on the stairs of the two school buildings. She had already forgotten her brother's insinuation. Had forgotten the mischievous twinkle in his eyes when he had urged her to join the class. Had forgotten even what she had once nursed in her innermost... But now she was silly enough to let that fortune-teller goad her into believing in cartomancy! Who would be that kind-hearted sponsor? Her aunt? She burst into laughter at the ridiculous idea that the queen of hearts could be the image of this toothless aunt of hers. Funny as well as silly.

"Why all this laughter?", Tuan's question startled her.

"Well, what's so amusing?" he asked again.

"Oh, nothing!", she replied. "Any experience in cartomancy, Tuan?"

"None," he answered. "Women's business, you, know. The way you laughed it must be interesting right?"

"Nonsense! Amusing though."

She was quite at her ease now. A burden shared was indeed no longer a burden She could even laugh now.

"Could you believe that...," she confided her secret to the young student whom she had wished only a moment before had not been here. She poured out her heart in a simple way, even ridiculing herself a little bit. She started with her worries over the fortune-teller's predictions. She talked of all her hopes and disappointments. Naively and candidly.

Tuan looked out of the window listening to her confidences with increasing surprise. Well, who would think that this seemingly simple-minded and coquettish clerk was capable of all this! Up to this point, he had thought that no real people could ever stir in him such an emotion and all these deep and

serene feelings could only be found in people in works of fiction. And the war. Two months before, his own brother had not returned after a flight. But he did not weep when he stood by his grave in a small cemetery in Central Vietnam, swept day and night by the withering hot Southwesterly wind. A forlorn place with singed turfs of weed and withered banana flowers. And the joss-sticks burned like a torch...

His brother had been in love too. His girl had never come to the house and Tuan did not know what she looked like. But he could guess as he read his brother's diary and poems dedicated to her. She must be somewhere now trying to overcome her grief, trying to find relief in self-denial and in her work. Just like the woman facing him now. It seemed that there was a good store of courage in every woman for use in emergency. Just in case.

Tuan was still looking out of the window as So talked on. At the vast and deep blue sky. Was there any difference in sorrow between her blue headscarf and his brother's passionate poems? Was it fair that this woman's heart could flutter but once and that the blue scarf should remain forever at the bottom of her suitcase? Should she retain a young girl's chastity all her life and always be aroused

from sleep by some baby's cries and then lie wide awake all night thinking of nothing but her lost paradise?

One afternoon, Tuan entered the office and standing awkwardly in front of her, he mumbled out, "Well, So..."

"What's the matter?" So asked "Everything is all right with your exam?"

"Oh, yes." he replied. "Didn't you say the other day, So, that your Nisa calculator was not working?"

"Oh that!" So said." Yes, something is definitely the matter with my Nisa!"

"An acquaintance of mine repairs calculators of every make," he said. "I've asked him to..."

"Repair the Nisa?" So prompted. "But you aren't in need of it yet!"

"Yes, I know", Tuan went on. "But sooner or later it should be put right. Moreover, he's quite eager to lend a hand."

"That's very kind of you, Tuan," she thanked him. "I'll enquire if it will cost anything."

"He'll do it for free," Tuan hastened to add, seeing her pre-occupation. But Diem is a busy man and he can only do it after work hours. All you should do is to be here one or two evenings.

It would be better if you could repair your machine without having to spend government money. So she agreed. Tuan is really a nice chap, she thought. And a boy who can keep a secret. He will never betray her confidence.

It took Diem three evenings to repair the calculator, which was not so badly damaged, (and he could have done the job in just one evening). After the third evening Diem, a man of few words (but who was very pleasant to work with!), had become an old acquaintance – a friend of the family. He just came to the house and occupied a place – the sixth – which could have been hers if her brother's love had been quick enough. Now he was sitting there in mute amusement, smiling at her youngest sister and rolling one cigarette after another for her brothers. It seemed as if he had just come here to enjoy the presence of buoyant but amiable brothers and sister.

Tuan had never come with Diem to her house. He even tried to act as if he knew nothing of these visits. But every afternoon he always popped into the office and sang Diem's praises. Just like a manager making boast of his artist's talent.

"Do you know that he's the best man for the job, So? No broken machines are beyond him and he can do it in a wink!"

"In a wink?" So asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, in a wink. He's a war veteran and a skilled worker. He looked after everything mechanical in my house A sublime neighbour we have. But he is a little bit sheepish."

"Oh, not so sheepish," So laughed.

He talked and she listened. And they took pleasure in their conversation. Time flew by and spring again came round – the season that never forgot anybody.

Let's not describe as we usually do the romantic mood lovers often find themselves in when they have a moment together. For there was no romance in their talk at the start. It centered around her old and battered Remington typewriter and they decided that it was time it should be overhauled.

At first it was So who did the talking. She praised this outmoded typewriter forgetting that she herself had some time before mumbled about its deplorable state... Then all of a sudden, she realized that it was a kind of mónologue and she stopped and eyed him shamefacedly. The leaves rustled in the light breeze and they were wrapped up in a blanket of reddish mist. The silence terrified her and she felt terribly ill-at-ease. She had experienced this once long, long before... That's why she was afraid.

There was something gliding in the sky and they felt a light touch on their shoulders. Which was it? The wind? The mist? Or was it the thing that made Spring?

She couldn't believe her eyes – was the man beside her now Diem or the boy she had loved in her younger days? For they looked so alike – the same finely – chiselled face, the same rough hands, and the broad shoulders women would so like to lean on.

So what at first had been a vague hope had now become a reality. Apart from the wind and the sky, there was only Spring between them: Yes, only Spring between them.

COCONUT

A Vietnamese Legend

From their childhood a peasant couple worked for a rich landlord. They had no children. The woman, who was over fifty, was very sad.

One day, when she was collecting firewood in the forest, she wanted to have a drink. But there was no spring in the neighbourhood. Neither pond nor stream. Suddenly at the foot of a tree she found a human skull still containing some rain water. As he could not resist the temptation she put it to her slips. She felt at once a strong feeling of well being.

Soon after that she was with child. At that juncture her husband died and all the chores fell on her. She was overwhelmed by hardships and weariness. However, in her heart of hearts she was happy. She was going to give birth to a baby.

That day arrived at long last. Alas ! Where was the long wished for baby ? The poor woman gave

birth to a ball of flesh with two eyes, two ears, a nose and a mouth, but neither body, nor legs, nor arms...

She was about to throw the thing away when she heard it say :

"I am a human being, Mother. Have pity on me." The woman was moved to tears and gave it the breast.

The landlord ordered her to bury this ball, but she refused to obey him. So she was obliged to live alone in her hut in the middle of a field of manioc.

Her child, whom she called Coconut, was highly intelligent. When she left for work she asked him to behave himself.

"On my return I will give you a good handful of cooked rice", she said.

But as soon as his mother left, the ball turn into a little boy who did all the chores in the house, then turned again into his original shape and slept in his straw bed.

His mother was puzzled, but there was nothing she could do to solve the enigma.

In the meantime Coconut rolled like a ball wherever he went. At first the local people were much

afraid, but they gradually got used to this abnormal child.

One day, seeing that his mother was sadder than usual the boy asked her the reason.

"When they are seven years old children usually look after buffaloes and goats. What shall we do with the pack of goats which our master cannot find anyone to look after ?" she said.

"Mother, I can look after the goats all right. Please go and talk to the master about it." he said.

It was quite a job for her to persuade the landlord to accept the offer. In the end, he said :

"Tell him to come here every morning to lead the goats onto the hill and to bring them home in the evening."

The next morning, Coconut rolled to the farm. Rain or shine, he did his work every day, and never had goats grown fat so quickly. The landlord was very pleased, because he had to pay the guardian boy a poor salary." Two handfuls of cooked rice a day. That's all !"

He had three daughters who differed in character from one another. The eldest was naughty, the second had a heart of stone. But the youngest was as sweet as she was good.

At harvest time, when everybody was busy in the fields, the girls took turns to bring Coconut his meals on the hill...

One day it was the youngest girl's turn to do the job. When she came to the foot of the hill she stopped, struck by the melodious tunes of a flute. Noiselessly she climbed the slope and, hiding in a thicket, she looked out. A very handsome young lad about seventeen years old was lying in a silk hammock. Birds perched on his shoulders while he was playing. The tune was so beautiful that the girl's heart beat to the rhythm of the melody. She leaned against a branch. The branch broke. On hearing this noise, Coconut, for it was he, changed back into his primitive shape

From that day the girl tried by every means to bring the best dishes to the strange boy.

Coconut loved his mother and understood her secret sadness.

"Mother," he said to her one day, "buy a bunch of areca nuts and go to the master's house to ask for the hand of one of his daughters."

His mother could not help laughing:

"Who would like to marry you, my poor child?"

However, at his insistence, she agreed to go to see the landlord. Stroking his beard the landlord said :

"How could such a monster mount an elephant?"

But on second thoughts he said :

"Tell your son that I will give him the hand of one of my daughters on some conditions. He must bring here a gold grain pot, ten pieces of pink flowery silk, ten fat pigs, also ten goats, and ten jars of the best alcohol. I require also a tile-roofed brick house whose main beam and columns are made of silver and the other beams of copper. I will give him my daughter on these conditions."

The poor mother returned home down-hearted. But to her stupefaction she heard her son say :

"Mother, go to the landlord and tell him I accept very willingly."

His mother, not believing her ears, nevertheless went to give the reply. This time the landlord pondered :

"I must know which of my daughters will accept his offer." The two elder sisters leapt up with indignation.

But the youngest girl said :

"Father, I will do what you want"

Then the landlord, turning to the woman, agreed on the day for bringing the betrothal presents. The man added, however :

"It will cost you your life if you try to offend me."

Coconut continued to guard the cattle, as calm and confident as before. His mother, tormented with worry, often said to him :

"How can we get out of this dilemma?"

He smiled.

At last the great day arrived. The poor mother looked in vain around her. There were only some torn pieces of mats and some chipped earthern pots in the humble straw hut. Desperate, she threw herself on her pallet and dropped off to sleep.

When she woke up she could not believe her eyes. Her bed was made of carved *gu* wood, and her covering was made of brocade. No more mud dwelling, but a brick house with silver columns and copper beams. In a corner was the gold grain pot, and pieces of embroidered silk. She saw the goats under the verandah, and the very fat pigs near some jars full of alcohol.

But alas! only her son had not changed! He remained a ball as before.

He rolled out of his bed onto the ground.

'Eh ! Come here !' he said.

Twenty servants entered the room.

Dazzled, the mother looked at everything without understanding anything.

The presents were carried to the master's house.

The mother followed.

Coconut rolled.

The master, whether he liked it or not, was compelled to comply.

That same evening Coconut organized a reception to welcome the bride to his family home.

It was the most sumptuous feast ever seen. The whole village was invited to attend.

When night came, Coconut disappeared. Everybody wondered where he was. Suddenly the couple came in. A handsome young man was standing near the bride.

– Ladies and gentlemen my dear parents, I am Coconut. My young wife and I wish to convey to you our respectful greetings and our sincere thanks for your presence. Let's drink a cup of alcohol together to seal forever our great friendship.

When the news of Coconut's transformation reached the master's house the two sisters were eaten up with jealousy.

The young man started his studies. When the mandarinal examinations were held he easily won the first place with the title of Doctor. Unfortunately his mother died at this juncture and he had to go back to his native village.

A little while later he was appointed ambassador by royal decree. Before he left he gave his young wife a piece of flint, a knife and two eggs and advised her to carry them with her all the time.

However, the two elder sisters became more and more jealous of their youngest sister and decided to kill her.

One calm night, they came to see her and asked her to go out boating. She accepted the invitation without suspecting anything. The wicked sisters took the boat to the mouth of the river where enormous fish were living When among the huge waves they jumped onto the shore taking the oars with them and violently shoved the boat away. Caught in the whirlpools the boat turned over.

The two sisters called for help, saying that their careless sister had drowned...

She was not drowned. The young woman did not lose her presence of mind in the belly of a big fish. With her knife she killed the fish whose corpse

floated to the surface and was thrown onto the shore. The young woman then cut some of the flesh of the fish and put the salty pieces in a hollow tree to make some pickling brine out of them. She gathered some twigs and striking the flint she made a fire to warm and feed herself.

She made herself a shelter with bamboo and leaves.

Every day she went into the forest to gather fruit and yams.

Her two eggs, which were kept in the warmth of a straw nest, finally hatched out. She had two chickens which she fed on caterpillars, and which soon became a cock and a hen.

Time went by. The river was deep and the forest dense. How to get out of them ?

One evening, the young woman heard her cock cry :

"Cock-a-doodle-do, if it is the Doctor's boat, perhaps he is coming to look for my mistress."

She rushed towards the river bank. A man was standing at the prow of the boat. As the boat came nearer the silhouette became clearer.

"Coconut", she cried.

It was indeed he. The couple fell into each other's arms, shedding tears of joy. Then she told him about her painful experiences.

When they were back home, Coconut asked his wife to hide in a room. Then he invited his relatives and in-law's to a great party.

The two elder sisters, in their loveliest attire, vied with each other in coquetry towards the presumed widower, pretending to bemoan their youngest sister's tragic death.

Hardly had the guests emptied their first cups of alcohol when Coconut disappeared.

When he returned with his young wife at his side the two wicked sisters turned pale and ran away.

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